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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ASHGABAT 000146

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SUBJECT: JANUARY 29 MEETING WITH NURY BAYRAMOV FROM THE  
MINISTRY OF EDUCATION

REF: ASHGABAT 1500

Classified By: Charge Sylvia Reed Curran, Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: PAO met with Nury Bayramov, Head of the International Department of the Ministry of Education (MinEd) on January 29th to discuss ongoing collaboration between the Embassy and the GOTX in the sphere of education. Bayramov was interested in pursuing an agreement for Turkmen students to study in American institutions in the United States, but only if the Turkmen side selected the students. Given that experience has shown that GOTX selection of students for educational programs and exchanges is rife with corruption, Bayramov's proposal is something we should approach with our eyes wide open. END SUMMARY.

TASP RESOLVED - LET'S TALK!

12. (C) After submitting a request to meet with Ministry of Education International Department Head Nury Bayramov in August 2009, the MFA called at 1600 on January 29th and asked if the PAO would be willing to meet with Bayramov at 1700 that same day. The meeting request was granted immediately on the heels of the departure of the TASP scholars to Bulgaria. Besides Bayramov, Dovlet Kurbanov, Head of Secondary Education programs, and Hojiberdiev Sahriyev, Head of Higher Education Programs, attended the meeting from the Ministry of Education. Hemra Amannazarov from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs also attended.

A LITTLE MORE CLARITY INTO WHAT HAPPENED WITH TASP

13. (C) At the beginning of the meeting, the PAO thanked MinEd and the MFA for their cooperation in finally allowing the participants in the TASP program to travel to the American University in Bulgaria (AUBG) and asked what next steps are necessary to allow the other former students at the American University in Central Asia (AUCA) to leave Turkmenistan to continue their education. Bayramov answered that "he was working on the problem," and that it would be necessary for the students to show MinEd that they had enrolled at an "approved" foreign institution. He continued that the GOTX had informed the Embassy several times over the years of the GOTX's displeasure with the various programs that sent

Turkmen students to AUCA and other "private, unapproved" universities in Central Asia. (COMMENT: His hint was aimed at the Kazakh Institute of Management and Economics (KIMEP). The Turkmen have long expressed displeasure over sending students to study elsewhere in Central Asia. END COMMENT.) In conclusion, Bayramov said that "we need to make sure in the future to listen to one another and always keep one another informed."

LET'S SEND TURKMEN KIDS TO THE U.S., IF...

14. (C) After discussing TASP, Bayramov raised the issue of a purported "U.S. proposal to send Turkmen students to universities in the United States." (COMMENT: Bayramov was referring to a Letter of Intentions document that was submitted to the GOTX in October 2009 in hopes of resolving the TASP situation (see reftel). President Berdimuhamedov had said some sort of agreement should be submitted to allow the TASP students to leave for Bulgaria, and FM Meredov had offered that such an agreement could be very basic. The Letter was designed to get the GOTX to allow students to travel to AUBG. The proposed Letter of Intention had only two elements -- that the U.S. side would provide scholarships for a certain number of Turkmen students to study each year at "American institutions" (in other words, a continuation of TASP) and that current TASP students would be allowed to study at AUBG. END COMMENT.)

MINISTRY OF EDUCATION CONTROL

15. (C) Bayramov said the GOTX could support a program to send

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Turkmen students to U.S. universities under several conditions. First, he said that MinEd would need to select the students. He graciously invited the USG to participate in the selection process by "allowing our (U.S.) specialists to assess the students knowledge of English if necessary." Bayramov said that it was important for the GOTX to select the students to "ensure that they don't embarrass us or you."

Bayramov added that the GOTX would only support the program if they could also select the fields of study for the students. He said that the GOTX needs students to study "engineering, information technology, oil and gas, chemistry, and energy," and continued that such controversial topics as "law, history, and others" were best left covered by Turkmen experts.

AN AVENUE FOR ACTUAL COOPERATION?

16. (C) After receiving Bayramov's proposal and promising to discuss it further, the PAO raised the prospect of using existing programs to bring U.S. experts to Turkmenistan to cooperate in the fields that Bayramov mentioned. Bayramov agreed that the United States has many experts in these fields and that he would support placing them in a Turkmen institution for a "two-four week intensive lecture series." He said that stays longer than a month would be "unnecessary."

17. (C) COMMENT: As the Embassy has long suspected, the primary roots of the problems with TASP are three-fold; first, the GOTX doesn't like sending Turkmen kids to schools in other Central Asian countries; second, MinEd doesn't like programs where they can't get a cut of the proceeds (i.e. select the students themselves and get massive bribes); and finally, the GOTX sees no need for education in fields outside the hard sciences. On multiple occasions throughout the TASP situation, we have heard MinEd officials belittle education in "useless" topics like European History, Journalism, and American Studies.

18. (C) COMMENT CONTINUED: If we decided to pursue an educational agreement with the Turkmen where they get to pick the students, we need to enter with our eyes wide open. Based on the experience with other international exchange programs and with what Turkmen officials have told us, it is

clear what we can expect. Turkmen officials will choose students whose families are well-connected and/or have paid a lot of money. Since a degree from a U.S. university is viewed as the gold standard in education, the amount of money MinEd could get would put the up to \$100,000 for Turkmen State's Law Faculty to shame. In addition, it is likely the students would be woefully unqualified to pass a TOEFL, SAT, or even manage basic science and math courses. Nevertheless, they would expect these students to graduate and may insist that they attend only a "prestigious" U.S. university such as MIT or Stanford. And it goes without saying that MinEd would select only ethnic Turkmen from "good families." Kids from other nationalities would not even be considered. Command of the Turkmen language would be a requirement for study in the U.S., just as it is to participate in official exchanges to Romania and Russia.

¶9. (C) COMMENT CONTINUED: Former MFA Americas Department Chief Serdar Bashimov (strictly protect) in 2009 warned us against ever allowing his government to control the selection of participants in U.S. educational exchanges. He noted that the Texas A&M exchange had been tainted by widespread corruption by the Turkmen educational officials involved. Bashimov said if the GOTX selected the participating students, the whole exchange would be rendered a useless, corrupt mess. These are the words from the then leading MFA official working on U.S. affairs.

¶10. (C) COMMENT CONTINUED: Bayramov's agreement to allow U.S. specialists to work for up to a month in Turkmen universities and institutions is something new. In the past, the Embassy has never successfully placed either a Fulbright Fellow or an

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English Language Fellow into a Turkmen institution. While a two-four week program is not as impactful as a full semester, the Fulbright Specialist program could allow for multiple U.S. scholars to come each year to work in the academic fields in which the GOTX has expressed an interest, opening doors for long-term educational cooperation. END COMMENT.  
CURRAN